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ABSTRACT

This paper focuses on English language teaching for the hospitality industry in Hong Kong, presenting a brief statement on the concept of transfer and its relevance to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for the world of work. The observable changes in the nature of language in the world of work in a service-oriented economy are explained, based on the premise that the goal of language training for the hospitality industry is quality communication in the service encounter. The changing nature of language at work in the service industries and the language of service in the world of hospitality are examined, and the need for communication convergence in the service encounter is highlighted as a means of achieving client satisfaction. The pedagogical implication is a need to incorporate a substantial, cross-cultural communication component into the hospitality language curriculum. It is recommended that language learning be construed essentially as a linguistic experience of culture transfer. Effective EFL teaching for the hospitality industry must consider three aspects of culture transfer: (1) teaching must be aimed at successful transfer from classroom to workplace; (2) changing cultural values of the industry must be understood and transferred to the culture of the English classroom; and (3) transfer between service staff and guest must be an integral aspect of foreign language use in the professional service encounter. (Contains nine references.) (NAV)

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Quality communication in hospitality: language skills or culture transfer?

Peggy Leung and Terence Lo

Abstract: *The argument of this paper is based on the premise that the goal of language training for the hospitality industry is quality communication in the service encounter. It examines the changing nature of language at work in the service industries, and the language of service in the world of hospitality, and highlights the need for communication convergence in the service encounter as a means of achieving client satisfaction. The pedagogical implication is a need to incorporate a substantial cross-cultural communication component into the hospitality language curriculum. The paper concludes with a call for language learning to be construed essentially as a linguistic experience of culture transfer.*

Introduction

Teachers are familiar with the idea that education is to do with thinking, and training is to do with work; and very naturally, most see themselves as educators rather than trainers. However, teachers of English for specific professional purposes must be both: they need to educate learners to think about the ever-changing English language in communicative interactions in general; but they must also train their students to use the language in specific work settings. In this paper, we explore the use of *cultural* concepts as an approach to English language training in the specific professional sphere of hospitality work, and consider how, through such explorations in the English language classroom itself, we might transfer to our students a certain degree of cultural awareness relevant to the use of English in professional communication.

The focus of this paper is on English language teaching for the hospitality industry in Hong Kong. It first presents a brief statement on the concept of "transfer", and examines the relevance of this concept to teaching English as a Foreign Language (EFL) for the world of work. Secondly, it explains the changes that may be observed in the nature of language in the world of work in a service-oriented economy in general, and in

the world of the hospitality industry in particular. It concludes with a tentative recommendation for a "culture transfer" perspective to EFL programmes for students going into hospitality work.

Training for transfer

First, a brief statement on the concept of "transfer". A relevant observation here is that, for the majority of workers in the hospitality industry in Hong Kong, English is a *foreign* language rather than a *second* language. In other words, they tend to speak English at work only to people who do not speak the local Cantonese. EFL teachers preparing hospitality students for the world of work will therefore have three main concerns. They will have to ensure that:

(i) the learners are given adequate classroom training in English as a foreign language;
(ii) the training is geared directly towards foreign language communicative interaction in hospitality service; and
(iii) the learners are able to transfer what they have learnt in the classroom to the workplace in order to enhance the quality of the hospitality service.

In an ideal situation, therefore, the students will be given classroom training in EFL, and will subsequently be able to transfer what they have learnt to the world of the hospitality industry. But the real world is rarely ideal. In many cases training and performance do not match because the classroom environment is vastly different from the real world of work. The classroom EFL training may simply be irrelevant to the world of work, even though it may be relevant to assessment criteria that are appropriate in the classroom environment. In other cases, EFL learners may fail to transfer what they have learnt successfully in the classroom to the workplace because their language experience is too firmly grounded in the classroom environment. In either situation, the classroom training proves inadequate.

In order to train students to transfer classroom learning effectively to the real world of work, EFL teachers need to get to know enough about the world of work that the students are training for. In these rapidly-changing times, this requires more than the familiar needs analysis and

materials design. We are proposing that, in today's world, we need to examine the changing nature of communication at work in a service-oriented culture in general, and in this specific case, communication in the hospitality industry.

Changing nature of communication at work in a service culture

It appears that the up-market sectors of the hospitality industry, and indeed the up-market sectors of the service industry in Hong Kong as a whole, are looking for professional workers with certain distinct characteristics. In general, these service workers are required to demonstrate four **professional qualities**; they are expected to:

(i) project a knowledgeable image;
(ii) be able to make (often on-the-spot) decisions as to the best way to take advantage of existing resources;
(iii) take personal pride in being sensitive to other people's needs, and in contributing to other people's personal satisfaction; and
(iv) work comfortably in a flexible system of cooperation with colleagues.

Professional service workers handling front-line encounters with clients are also ideally able to communicate to the client, in the often extremely brief service encounter, a number of **personal qualities**; they will demonstrate that they are:

(i) **functionally flexible**, in that they are able to take the initiative in suggesting different ways to get things done to suit different situations, rather than being constrained by standard procedures;

(ii) **institutionally and/or inter-departmentally mobile**, not only with regard to physical mobility, but also in terms of the intellectual ability to think inter-institutionally and inter-departmentally. They will give the impression that they are able to make good use of the experience accumulated and transferred from elsewhere, rather than being restricted to their immediate work environment;

(iii) possessed of a strong sense of **personal autonomy**, shown in the ability to take initiatives to open up communication channels, to make decisions on-the-spot, and to explain reasons for the decisions made; and seen also in a willingness to accept responsibility for taking suitable remedial action, rather than relying on the bureaucratic practice of decision avoidance to protect oneself; and

(iv) **politically sovereign**, in the sense of having the capacity for genuine personal opinion and the ability to evaluate critically the available alternatives in their own everyday life, rather than having merely to role-play established scripts of social interaction.

The language of service in the world of hospitality

Our observation in Hong Kong is that top hotel managers tend to associate these qualities with the concept of *empowerment*. Managers of top hotels have repeatedly stated that they aim to empower staff through training. For example, the Marriot Hotel wants to train staff "to be flexible and to think on their feet, to look at problem-solving techniques, and to espouse open communication". They want their staff to be "trained to make a guest feel comfortable, to be flexible, to anticipate needs, to be consistent, and to achieve a perfect balance of friendliness and respect". And they understand that "the reputation the hotel enjoys for the quality of its service comes down to making staff feel happy to be at work and proud of their jobs". Meanwhile, the General Manager of the Mandarin Oriental Hotel has stated publicly that the hotel needs to recruit "people who like variety...flexible people who have a desire to grow...people who have a good attitude towards themselves, feel good about themselves, and want to be a part of a team".

Turning from the training philosophies of hotel managers to hotel recruitment advertisements, a survey has shown a high degree of correspondence between the market standard of the hotels and the language used in such advertisements. Hotels in the higher market sectors tend to use language that is more individual-oriented, and that focuses more on the personal career development of the potential recruit; while those in the lower market sectors tend to be more management-oriented

in the language used, and focus more on the functional operations of the hotel establishment.

Many of the hotel staff recruitment advertisements that we have collected from newspapers in Hong Kong take a traditional approach. Emphasis is placed on the instrumental skills needed for specific, functional operations; on work experience expressed in terms of length of service in similar positions; and on the salary, fringe benefits and career advancement opportunities that the organization will make available to successful applicants. Some start with statements about the size of the organization and the scale of its operation. Others open with a more or less formulaic statement to the effect that they are looking for people with motivation and enthusiasm to join the dynamic team of a successful operation, before lapsing into something more mundane. There are a relatively small number of exceptions: the Century Hong Kong Hotel, for example, has an advertisement that promotes at length the hotel's organizational commitment to "providing...guests with the highest quality service", to "caring for people", and to "the community...through charity events" before going on to list the job openings in a less prominent part of the advertising space.

We have also examined the *1993 Graduates' Yearbook* of the Hong Kong Polytechnic's Hotel and Tourism Department. In the opening message, the Director of the Polytechnic notes that the Yearbook provides an interface between the hotel industry and students graduating from the Polytechnic's hospitality training courses, by formally introducing the hospitality graduates to the industry. There are a number of advertisements in the Yearbook from hotels welcoming the 1993 graduates to the industry by offering information on career opportunities.

It is possible to group the advertisements into three categories. Those in the first category give priority to information on salaries and other employee benefits. One of these advertisements invites graduates to join, provides details of hotel size and geographical location, and follows this with a number of testimonials from former trainees praising the quality of the training experience. Another highlights its direct access to Hong Kong's underground train system and the convenience this offers. A further advertisement simply offers a long list of staff benefits. Advertisements in this first category tend to adopt fairly conventional

wording and style, and emphasize an instrumental exchange relationship between the employer and the employee.

Hotels in the second category make use of very specific interpersonal elements to help convey instrumental, functional information. These include personal messages from and photographs of past graduates from the Polytechnic's hospitality training courses to prove that the hotels offers attractive career opportunities for those graduating. One advertisement features 27 individual photographs of alumni now occupying managerial positions, under the slogan "Join us now, one day you will be there!" Another is headed: "The human touch - the genuine concern for both our guests and our fellow colleagues", with further information presented in the form of a handwritten letter from a 1992 graduate, and with the outline of a human hand reaching out in the background.

Particularly interesting is the third category of advertisements, which uses language that is explicitly people-oriented, appealing to more abstract notions of professionalism and personal development. For example, the Hilton Hotel emphasizes the Hilton promise to offer a world of career excellence and to respond to guests' needs, then suggests that hospitality graduates should plan their careers early and choose an employer that suits them. The message from the Conrad Hotel connects "work" and "reward" with "style" and "pleasure", and states explicitly that the hotel gives priority to people over facilities. The Grand Hyatt Hotel also highlights the importance of having the best people on the staff of a top hotel, and promises a "Grand career".

A survey of hotel promotion campaigns in Hong Kong has also revealed a similar correspondence between market positioning and the advertising language used. In general, luxury hotels in the higher market sectors tend to emphasize the human face of the hotel staff, as well as a sense of simplicity and of a personal touch in the provision of services. Those in relatively lower market sectors tend to highlight functional efficiency and glamorous facilities.

Training for personal communication

We would suggest that the quality of an EFL programme for personnel in the hotel and hospitality industries can be evaluated in terms of its

success in:

(i) developing the learners' awareness of the cultural significance of industry-specific communicative strategies such as those considered above; and

(ii) transferring the necessary cultural competence to the learners to enable them to participate appropriately in industry-specific contexts.

Research studies and professional experience in hospitality work clearly indicate that perceptions of hotel service quality are increasingly being determined by the quality of the guest's experience during the relatively brief face-to-face interaction with service staff in service encounters. In contrast, the physically tangible aspects of the hospitality service product have become less important (Lundberg 1991), a tendency that is particularly the case in the context of up-market hospitality establishments, where the quality of the accommodation, catering and business facilities are often taken for granted. It has been noted (Zeithaml *et al.* 1990) that guests are most likely to evaluate service quality in terms of the staff's:

(i) degree of responsiveness in helping customers;
(ii) inclination to assure customers about their ability to perform their tasks; and
(iii) efforts invested in achieving empathetic understanding of customer needs and in giving customers individualized attention.

In the hospitality industry, it is the nature and quality of communication during the service encounter that establishes - and confirms - guests' expectations about the quality of the hospitality product. Guests invariably judge on the basis of one or more of the various dimensions of service quality whether or not they are getting value for money in the service transaction. To enable guests to perceive quality, it is essential to provide adequate relevant information on the services being offered and on the range of choices available, so that they have a reasonable basis on which to make comparisons and to take decisions in relation to their personal circumstances.

Information is often the primary factor that distinguishes the satisfactory service encounter from the unsatisfactory (Bitner 1990). With the quality of the hospitality product increasingly being evaluated on the communicative dimensions of the service transaction, it is crucial for service staff also to focus more on the interpersonal dimensions of their relationship with guests. Personalizing the provision of information requires the *flexible* use of communication to develop an understanding of guests' attitudes and behaviour. In order to establish this more personalized understanding, it is often necessary to use uncertainty-reduction strategies, such as questioning and self-disclosure, to match the expectations service staff and guests have of each other. Reducing staff's uncertainty about guests as unique individuals increases their confidence in anticipating the guests' needs, and in meeting those needs more successfully. Reducing guests' uncertainty about service staff also enables guests to feel more at ease in making their needs known, and hence to achieve more effective communication.

Language training for culture transfer

We are proposing a strategy of **communication accommodation** in the hospitality service encounter as a way to achieve quality service (Sparks & Callan 1992). This involves giving service staff the necessary training in communication to enable them to work towards an appropriate degree of communicative convergence with the guest. Communicative convergence will ensure that both the service staff and the guest have an adequate degree of shared, mutual understanding of their respective roles in the service transaction. This will reduce the likelihood of the guest experiencing dissatisfaction due to discrepancy between the expectation and the actual service provision.

The most important aspect of communication convergence in the hospitality service encounter is the staff's initiative in demonstrating a positive service attitude through the use of affiliative skills when interacting with guests. The aim of such affiliative communication is for the service staff to be seen to be willing to converge towards the guest's culture, and to show that they are doing so in order to make the guest feel welcome and at ease in a strange environment.

Attempts to achieve convergence must not, however, be made in such a way as to lead to negative perceptions. Part of the push for professionalism in the service industry comes from the professionalization of the client base - and people from professional backgrounds tend to appreciate cultural diversity. Professional service staff, then, will be those who are:

(i) capable of understanding guests' cultural values;
(ii) confident in themselves as personal representatives of the local culture; and
(iii) able to articulate the cultural differences between the guest and the host community.

Training in cross-cultural communication should therefore be made an integral part of EFL for the hospitality industry. Cross-cultural training is particularly appropriate at a time when the hotel industry is encountering increased multicultural diversity in terms of ownership, work force and client base. Involvement with individuals of diverse behavioural and attitudinal orientations makes multicultural training of service staff essential. Training for cross-cultural management in the hospitality industry will enable personnel to take advantage of cultural diversity as a human resource rather than viewing it as a barrier to communication (Welch & Welch 1987; Welch *et al.* 1988).

Multicultural awareness broadens one's range of strategies for understanding and for getting oneself understood. It also increases one's ability to explain the many ways in which culture influences perceptions. To train hospitality service staff to understand guests' needs, it is important to encourage them to examine their own value orientations and their expectations about guests' needs and behaviour, including their stereotypical impressions about guests in general and about guests from particular social groups and countries.

A foreign language curriculum for hospitality and tourism students will have to integrate language with culture by placing the emphasis on cultural understanding rather than on the mechanical mastery of language skills for narrow instrumental, functional purposes (Whyte 1990). The curriculum will aim to promote skills that enable service staff to develop the competence to articulate their own personal cultural values in a language that guests from overseas can understand. It will also involve

the critical examination of the learners' own ideological orientations as a necessary experiential step in acquiring a foreign language (Dore 1988; Brogger 1992).

Conclusion

In this paper, we have made use of the concept of "culture transfer" in three related senses. We have argued that effective EFL teaching for the hospitality industry must take into consideration these three senses of "culture transfer":

(i) Language teaching for the world of work must aim at the successful transfer of language skills learnt in the classroom to the workplace.

(ii) The changing cultural values of the hospitality industry must be understood and transferred to the culture of the English classroom.

(iii) Culture transfer between service staff and guest must be seen as an integral aspect of foreign language use in communicative interaction in the professional service encounter.

With these three points in mind, we believe that the traditional drilling of formulaic expressions will gradually diminish in importance in the hospitality English classroom. Our students on day-release courses have told us that their managers are already asking them to avoid using over-standardized expressions when interacting with guests. Moreover, when asked what guests from overseas most like to talk to them about, the students invariably respond that most ask them about their personal feelings concerning the transfer of the colony back to China in 1997. It will certainly not be sufficient to train these students to repeat parrot fashion the official line that the situation in Hong Kong will remain unchanged for 50 years.

We suggest that in quality hospitality service provision it is necessary to see the guest and the front-line staff as the principal stakeholders. Foreign language trainers of staff in international hospitality establishments may find it more appropriate to construe teaching/learning as a linguistic

experience of culture transfer between people from different cultural backgrounds, rather than view language training as drilling in standardized expressions - a trap into which fast-expanding hospitality chains may easily fall.

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